

AN: Well, after the absolutely horrific secrets that were uncovered last time, things can only get better now, right? *Wrong.*

Poison

Stakeout

The house was silent.

Eerie and unnerving, the only signs of movement were in the shadows. They shifted slowly, scarily, like invisible ghouls that threatened to haunt the place for hundreds of years to come. Sadly, such frightening horrors were not the cause of this particular motion. The inhabitants of the house had something far more physical to fear.

A human being.

Heavy rain battered the outside world, splashing against the screen door that the intruder had silently slid open in order to invade the house. He knew the place both inside and out, and had concluded this was the door that was always left open; its population had very little concern for safety, it seemed.

That was good enough for the intruder, who scanned the darkness of the living room without the need for the light. He was perfectly capable of finding his way around with ease; he knew exactly what he was doing and he knew how to do it. A key aspect of his little mission was to conduct it with a high level of expertise and grace. After all, an amateurish effort would only result in unwanted consequences that could become problematic for him later. That was simply unacceptable.

Sticking to the shadows, the intruder was careful not to touch anything; not the wooden mantelpiece, not the expensive TV, not the plush leather sofa. No trace of his invasion could be left to be discovered by those who were professionals at locating such things. Fingerprints were the main concern; that simply would not do at all. He would be found out instantly and thrown in jail before he could even summon up a convincing alibi.

The key tactic was to be precise. He took as few steps as possible, making sure to remain in the darkness and avoid contact with everything that could possibly be touched. He didn't even have to open the doors that blocked his way. No one had bothered to shut them. Such was the poor security in this house; it was practically begging to be robbed.

But the intruder wasn't a burglar. There was only one thing he was interested in stealing, and it wasn't the millions of dollars in drug money stored underneath his shoes in impregnable metal vaults. He knew about them – he could have even broken into them with relative ease if he so desired – but they held no significance in his mind. Money was of no concern.

A personal sight that he avoided was that of his own reflection in the large mirror above the mantelpiece. It ashamed him. He didn't want to look at himself, for he knew that what he was about to do was something most horrific and yet most yielding when he was finished. Such was the torturous aspect of this task.

The intruder slipped through the open doorway, ducking his head so it didn't collide with the wall above as he entered the hallway. A wooden staircase to his left curved upwards into the first floor of the house. After meticulously studying the plans of the building, he had memorised that there were three floors, although he needn't go past the first. All he had to do was climb a few stairs and he would reach his destination. It was that simple. Of course, from anybody else's perspective, it didn't seem like a simple effort at all. However, when you'd poured over plans and specifications for weeks on end, breaking into a house of this size and magnitude felt like child's play. Criminal child's play, but child's play nonetheless.

Sometimes you had to break the law to stay on the right side of it.

The intruder spied a phone resting on a small circular table underneath the staircase. Frowning, he considered the ramifications of a light-night call from some pervert – "What're you wearing?" and such disgusting questions – or news from a dear relative that a member of the family had been injured or perhaps killed in some horrible accident.

These were things that simply wouldn't do either, and so the intruder acted upon them. He yanked out the phone cord soundlessly with a gloved hand, ensuring that no one would be waking up the whole house with its loud ringing. He didn't need to worry about anyone discovering the alteration; he would simply reattach the cord on his way out.

Confident that no sudden noises would be arousing anyone else in the house, the intruder started making his way up the carpeted staircase, thankful for the fact that it had been patterned with ugly flower pictures rather than just plain wood. The slightest stomping noise could awaken even the lightest sleeper.

He took the stairs one at a time, careful to avoid the third one; it squeaked. Not only had he studied the plans for hours on end, but he'd also monitored the house in secret for many hours during the day, resulting in quite a loss of sleep. It didn't matter, though; the intruder was assured by the knowledge that this would all be worth it in the end.

Reaching the top of the stairs, the intruder was thankful that the room he needed to enter was just in front of him. His lengthy surveillance sessions had told him that the house was only occupied by two people on this particular night. One was just down the hallway, while the other was who he was looking for.

The open doorway seemed almost inviting as he passed through it, stopping still in the centre of the bedroom. It had been painted a bright blue colour, decorated with the intention of it being suitable for a child.

Or, to be more precise, a baby.

And the occupant of the room in question – the very person whom the intruder had come to see that night – lay asleep in a crib, unaware of his presence.

Without expression – why anyone would take joy in this, the intruder didn't know – he reached a hand into his pocket, taking out a gun.

A bolt of lightning flashed outside in that moment, punctuated by a crack of thunder. Maybe it was an omen of what was to come.

Raising his hand which held the gun, the intruder took the time to stare at the baby. He was a tiny lion cub, no more than a few months old, he guessed. Unfortunately, his life was about to be cut short in the cruellest way.

But it had to be done. The intruder kept telling himself that.

Forcing back tears, trying to avoid breathing too loudly, the intruder steadied his shaky hand, focusing his aim on the small, young thing.

It has to be done, he thought repeatedly. *It has to be done...*

TPYMK's finger tightened on the trigger—

Bang!

—and the baby went to sleep for ever.

TPYMK could only stare at Sarafina with a broken-hearted look, gripping the armrests of his chair as he finished telling his story. She had sat on the sofa with attentive eyes and ears, willing to hear him out. She hadn't thought for a moment that he would confess to the truth. Bora was just talking crazy. He had the wrong guy, that was all. It happened often in this city; you could be mistaken for some criminal and end up in jail for the rest of your life just like that.

Still, TPYMK could tell just by looking at Sarafina that she was shell-shocked to hear this coming from him. It made him sick to his stomach that he had done such a terrible thing; he had told himself ever since that it was for a good reason. It was the only way he'd been able to live with himself after that. If he succumbed to the grief then he would most likely go insane, and he was determined to keep himself under control for as long as possible.

However, now it felt like he was only a stone's throw away from spiralling out of control. The situation had become worse than ever.

"A confession," said Bora, rising from the sofa. He had been sat right next to Sarafina, listening to the whole tale. He had already read about it in TPYMK's file, but to hear it from the horse's mouth was another thing entirely. The guy was going down now, no question about it. Any judge would be more than willing to throw him in jail for the murder of a defenceless baby. "Didn't expect that from you."

TPYMK remained silent. He looked ready to cry, although Sarafina severely doubted that he would ever give Bora the satisfaction of witnessing him doing that. He would sooner die first.

"Nothing more to say?" said Bora, cocking his head to the side. "You all done now, you murdering scumbag?"

He still said nothing.

"Fine," Bora said with a shrug. "No skin off my bones. Now, I think it's about time I put you where you belong: in a cell." He glanced at Sarafina. "I guess you'll be, uh... staying here, huh?"

Sarafina remained just as silent as the former detective, still stunned.

"Thought so," Bora grinned, before moving towards TPYMK.

"You won't arrest me," TPYMK said, finally speaking. He didn't even turn to look at Bora, merely staying in his seat.

That made Bora chuckle. He obviously found TPYMK's constant

attempts to resist very amusing. By this point, however, it was simply stupidity to try and wriggle his way out of this one. He had admitted to killing a baby – one of the most immorally outrageous acts one could ever commit – and that was simply unforgiveable. He was going to jail for a very long time. For ever, hopefully.

"Oh, really?" Bora laughed. "Then, uh, what does it look like I'm doing right now? Oh, yeah – booking your butt in front of your skimpy whore." He glanced at her, still smiling. "Her mouth must be open wider than when she's sucking your—"

"You won't arrest me," TPYMK interrupted, "because I know something that you don't."

"Is that right?" Bora asked. "Well, why don't you tell me and maybe I'll knock a day or two off of your life sentence?"

"You must know about the rise in the sale of Sumu," TPYMK said, still not looking at him. "It's on in the increase, isn't it?"

"What, you mean the market that I bet you're involved in?" Bora retorted. "Yeah, I know about it. Why?"

TPYMK finally turned to look at Bora, staring into his eyes. "Because I know where the Family of Blood are," he said, "and I can take you right to them."

"Wow," said Bora. "So not only are you a baby-murdering toilet bug, but you're also doing deals with the biggest drug gang in town. Your rap sheet is gonna set a new record by this point."

"I didn't say that," TPYMK said. He indicated Sarafina with a flick of his head. "Sarafina and I have been investigating them for quite some time. Trying to stop this gang. Doing your job for you, in other words."

"If we can't find 'em, then I doubt you can," Bora said confidently. "What do you know that I don't?"

"I'll tell you," TPYMK said, "if you promise to let me go."

"No chance," said Bora. "I've been waiting to take you down for ages, and I'm not gonna give up on the off chance that you know where the Family of Blood are hiding."

"Then I will kindly reveal in court that you stood by while the Family of Blood reaped from the benefits of drug dealing when I could have given you crucial information, but you refused," said TPYMK. "I think

it's safe to say that you'll be going down with me in that scenario."

TPYMK allowed himself a mild smirk. Bora thought that he had all the answers, but TPYMK was always one step ahead of him. He had no choice but to adhere to the former detective's demands if he wanted to keep his job.

Goddamn it, the detective thought, gritting his teeth to keep himself from lashing out and clawing something or someone to shreds.

Trying not to show his dismay, Bora relented. "What do you want?"

"Whatever copy of that file you have on me – I know you found it – I want it burnt until there's nothing left," TPYMK said. "Since you haven't recorded this conversation, it makes matters much simpler. You burn the file, I give you what you want, we stop the Family of Blood, and everyone's happy."

"You're taking me to them personally," Bora said.

"Wouldn't have it any other way," TPYMK replied, knowing that he had successfully killed two birds with one stone. Bora would let him go, and he would finally be able to avenge Sarafina after the Family of Blood's vicious attack on her. This was turning out to be a more productive day than he'd first thought. "So... where do you want to begin?"

The Junk-Mobile bounced along the dirt road, TPYMK driving it as carefully as possible as they travelled through the middle of the forest. Sarafina was sitting in the passenger seat, glancing up at him with a worried glance every once in a while. The former detective didn't see this, however; his eyes were firmly focused on the road.

Bora sat in the back, surveying the surroundings for any sudden signs of moment. TPYMK had insisted on driving, and the lion hadn't discarded the possibility that he might have arranged some sort of trap in order to kill him. Still, it didn't seem that anything was amiss – for now. Bora didn't trust TPYMK in the slightest, but he was willing to listen to him just this one time. It could mean a whole lot for the case.

And if it just turned out to be a dead end, then he could always put a bullet in TPYMK's head for wasting his time.

"How far up ahead is it?" Bora asked, staring into the distance. The dirt road seemed to cut right through the forest from one side to the other.

TPYMK replied by braking the car to a halt in a nearby ditch, causing

the occupants to jolt slightly at the impact. Despite Bora's first thoughts, they hadn't crashed; it was merely parked neatly in the rough patch of dirt. They could reverse back into the road with ease when their business was concluded. If they were still alive, that is.

"We're not going in all guns blazing," TPYMK said, turning to look at the detective. "I suppose this is what you would call a 'stakeout'."

Bora narrowed his eyes. "So you want us to just wait here with our claws up our butts?" He glanced around. "I can't even see anything around this goddamn hellhole. What, are they hiding in a cave?"

TPYMK scowled, reaching into the glove compartment and removing a pair of binoculars. He tossed them at Bora, pointing out of the windshield. "Look at those trees over there."

Sighing, the lion did as he was told, peering through the trees with the binoculars. "Looks like some scumbag shack to me."

"Exactly," said TPYMK. "It's where the Family of Blood are hiding." He glanced at Sarafina. "We've... encountered them previously."

"So a big drug gang are hiding out in a piece of junk like that?" laughed Bora, putting the binoculars down. "No super lab, no giant fortress?"

"Nope," TPYMK said. "I suppose they maintain the element of surprise. No one else would think to look in there. It's perfect."

"Okay. Let me get this straight: when I go in there, you're not just gonna drive off and fly off to Jamaica?"

"I'm afraid I don't see the logic in fleeing to a Caribbean country where I wouldn't blend in at all," TPYMK said in bemusement. "However, in response to your question, no. I won't be going anywhere, nor will Sarafina. I want to catch these people just as much as you do."

"Sure you do," said Bora, opening the door and climbing out of the car. "If it's in your best interests."

"I wouldn't go in there if I were you," TPYMK warned, sliding down the driver's window. "They may not have any guards outside, but there could be any number of tough streetwise gorillas in there waiting to tear you apart."

Bora noted the bruises on Sarafina's face. "You'd know from experience, huh?"

The lioness gave the detective a mild nod before staring down at her hind paws, seemingly far more interested in the purple colour of her claws rather than the situation at hand. She hadn't said a word for more than an hour now. Not since TPYMK had finished telling his story – or, rather, confession.

"Sarafina has bled – quite literally – for our investigation," TPYMK told him. "You don't need to involve her any further in this."

"I'm not going in there, anyway," Bora said. "I'm checking the outside from a closer perspective. It's better than just sitting around here all day."

"If that's what you want," TPYMK shrugged, blowing air out from his lungs. "See you when you get back."

Bora trundled off down the hill towards the shack hidden behind the mass of trees, leaving TPYMK and Sarafina sitting in silence. They stayed like that for a few moments, before the former detective decided to do what he thought he should and speak up.

"Listen, Sarafina," he began, "I know that you're... confused and hurt by what I said back there, but... there are a lot of other factors at play."

"What, like the fact that you, uh, shot a baby?" Sarafina said, looking into his eyes. "I guess I was right. I don't know anything about you at all."

"This isn't something that I did out of cold blood, Sarafina," TPYMK explained. "I'm not some deranged psychopath hell-bent on killing children. I did it for a professional reason that was for the benefit of the law. Not me."

"Wow – the benefit of the law, huh?" said Sarafina.

"Yes," TPYMK said. "Will you just please hear me out?"

"All right," said Sarafina. "Try me."

TPYMK thought for a moment, trying to find the right combination of words in order to explain his actions. "There used to be this big drug kingpin a while back – about three years ago now. He had something like twenty operations running in a handful of countries. And the police tried – they kept trying for *years* – to put this guy in jail, but they couldn't ever find him. He was always three steps ahead of them. Always moving, always hiding. Sticking to the shadows so that they couldn't ever get a conviction."

He noticed that he did seem to have Sarafina's full attention as he explained himself. That was something, he supposed.

"So, finally, I decided that something had to be done," TPYMK said. "Rather than arrest him, I plotted to kill this man myself. None of my colleagues or superiors knew about this; I was purely acting alone."

"I thought no one could catch him?" said Sarafina.

"No. No one could. However, he did have a family," TPYMK told her, "and a history of severe depression."

Now Sarafina was fully invested in the story.

"Now, I knew I couldn't find him, but I could find his family," TPYMK continued. "His wife, and... his baby. That was when I decided – I don't know why – that... if I couldn't kill him personally... then I would make him kill himself."

The last human on earth shifted uncomfortably in his seat, looking away from Sarafina. "I watched the house where his family lived for days. I studied every single thing about it for hours upon hours – and then, one night, I put my plan into action." He narrowed his eyes. "It all happened too easily. The baby died, and then... well, I was out before anyone even noticed."

Sarafina swallowed hard, unsure of what to say. "So... what happened to this drug lord?"

TPYMK looked at the lioness. "Three days later, he shot himself," he replied. "My plan... worked. His businesses crumbled, and the cities became a much safer place to live in. I've been ashamed of my actions that night ever since, but... I can't say it didn't have a positive effect. That's the simple truth of it."

Several moments of silence followed.

"I don't know what you think of me right now—"

Sarafina hushed him. "Listen," she cut in. "It's all in the past now, right?"

TPYMK stared at her for a moment, and then nodded. "Yeah," he said. "It's all in the past."

"Then... let's move on," Sarafina continued, as if forcing the words out from her throat. "Once all of this is over with... we're done, yeah?"

TPYMK couldn't tell whether the lioness was forgiving him or simply casting the event to one side, but whatever it was, he was going to take her acceptance gladly. The last thing he wanted was to drive a wedge between their relationship. She was his friend – his only friend – and he would have nothing without her. There would be no point to anything.

"Once this is over, we won't have to worry anymore," TPYMK told her. "I promise you that – for real, this time."

"Yeah," Sarafina said, leaning back in her chair and closing her eyes, as if a massive weight had been lifted from her shoulders. "Cool..."

"Yo, we got a problem," said Moto, scampering into the Family of Blood's usual meeting place. "Those rats are back."

Only Vitani was in the damp room, wiping dust from the table with a dirty cloth. "What the hell are you talking about, Moto?"

"Sarafina's waiting outside in the car with some official-looking guy," Moto hurriedly explained, staggering from side to side. He strained his brain to remember the details; his memory wasn't what it used to be. "And... and... some cop is checking out the outside of the shack."

"*What?*" Vitani yelled, her eyes widening in anger. "Who the hell are they?"

"All I know is Sarafina, V," replied Moto through glazed eyes. "Damn, that S is making me come down hard..."

Vitani grabbed the intoxicated cub by the shoulders, slapping him hard across the face so that she had his full attention. Well, most of it. It seemed that the cub found it hard to focus on anything these days except for getting high and selling more drugs. He was a mere shell of his former self.

"Moto," she snapped. "Tell me where they are."

"They're, like, outside, man," Moto said. "It's like inside, but... reverse."

Moto grunted and collapsed onto his back, unconscious. Vitani rolled her eyes and headed through an open doorway. Zira would have to hear about these intruders, and the cub knew that appropriate action would be taken.

And, when dealing with the Family of Blood, "appropriate action"

translated to "beating the intruders to a pulp and leaving them in a ditch on the road".

"All closed up," Bora said, climbing back into the Junk-Mobile. He glanced at TPYMK and Sarafina. "Would've tried the door, but like you said, they probably have security. Saw a cub going in, but... that's it." He shook his head. "Nothing."

"A cub?" said Sarafina, raising her eyebrows. "Did he have brown fur?"

Bora nodded. "Yeah."

"Moto," she muttered under her breath. That little scumbag. Sarafina wasn't a violent lioness by nature, but she would love nothing more than to put a bullet between that cub's eyes – or perhaps strangle him with a length of chain. Either way, it would be satisfying.

"What, that clown I interrogated who wouldn't spit a word out about his involvement with Death?" Bora asked, looking at TPYMK. "He looked amped out of his mind."

"Wouldn't surprise me," said Sarafina, her eyes filled with anger at the thought of him. "The guy's, like, the worst, yo."

"Well, maybe he'll come back out. Then we can grab his junk and jerk him off until he talks," Bora said, using vocabulary that TPYMK found less than colourful, to say the least. "That could work."

"You won't get a confession out of him," TPYMK said. "If you couldn't before, then you won't now. He's fully invested in the Family."

"We'll see once I'm done with him," Bora retorted in a challenging tone. "Can't be too hard to make the little punk squeal. Maybe a sledgehammer to the balls would do the—"

The lion was interrupted by the sound of gunfire rattling across the windshield.

"*Jesus Christ!*" Sarafina screamed, ducking underneath the glove compartment for cover. More gunshots shattered the windscreen and the driver's window as both TPYMK and Bora tried to hide from the barrage of bullets.

"*What the hell is going on?*" Bora yelled, keeping his head down as low as possible in the back. He noticed that the gunfire seemed to be emanating from in front of them, rather than from behind. If he could

just escape through the door...

"Obviously, someone's shooting at us," TPYMK said, reaching into his pocket for his gun... only to pull out a banana. "Oh, Christ – not again."

"*Who is it?*" Sarafina asked, clamping her paws over her ears. The sound was almost deafening.

"They're in the trees; I can't see," TPYMK muttered. He grabbed for the door handle. "*Out!*"

The former detective rolled into the ditch, hoping that Sarafina would follow by example and get out next. However, she seemed far too petrified to even move; she simply sat there with her eyes closed. More surprising was the fact that Bora had exited the car, joining TPYMK on his stomach.

"We've gotta get out of here, jackoff," Bora said, jerking his head in the direction of a stone wall behind them. "We should be able to hide behind there."

"No! We have to get Sarafina first!" TPYMK yelled, crawling to his knees, trying to get back inside the car to carry her out.

He ducked once more as another onslaught of gunshots tore through the hood of the car. Obviously, they had struck something flammable, as smoke started to emerge from the metallic surface, followed by savage orange flames.

"*No!*" TPYMK cried, as the flames blocked his path, igniting the driver's seat as the interior of the car caught fire as well. "No, no, *no! Sarafina!*"

"*No!*" roared Sarafina. "*Don't leave me in here! Help me!*"

The former detective could only stand there, watching helplessly as more bullets attacked the car and turned it into a massive fireball.

With Sarafina still trapped inside.

AN: And I bet you thought that this story wouldn't have a cliffhanger. Ha! Still, this story answered a lot of questions that I bet you had on your minds. So, we understand why TPYMK murdered the baby. But the Family of Blood know that the police are watching – and now Sarafina is trapped inside the fiery Junk-Mobile with seemingly no chance of escape. Will she burn to death?